

Navigating the third wave: Contemporary UK feminist activists and 'third-wave feminism'

Abstract

Since the start of the new millennium in the UK, a range of new feminist activities - national networks, issue-specific campaigns, local groups, festivals, magazines and blogs - have been formed by a new constituency of mostly younger women and men. These new feminist activities, which we term 'third-wave' feminism, have emerged in a 'post-feminist' context, in which feminism is considered dead or unnecessary, and where younger feminists, if represented at all, are often dismissed as insufficiently political. Representations of North American third-wave feminism are brought into play in these criticisms of the UK third wave, and insufficient attention has been paid to the distinctiveness of the UK contexts. Drawing on data from a survey of 1,265 people involved in post-2000 forms of feminism and semi-structured interviews with 30 feminist activists, the article sketches out the contours of the contemporary feminist movement and its activists, activism and priorities. It attends to differences and similarities between second and third waves, and situates contemporary UK feminism in its distinctive UK context. Arguing that feminism is both alive and relevant for significant numbers of people in the UK today, the paper interrogates younger feminists' reluctance to use the term 'third-wave feminism' to describe themselves, attributing this reluctance to ambivalent and cynical representations of the third wave in academic literature and the popular media.

Keywords

Feminism, third wave, post-feminism, activists, UK, representations

Introduction

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In contemporary Britain, young women are negotiating an individualized, reflexive, neoliberal context in which they are seen both as the heroines and failures of late modernity: the 'can do' girls of the New Labour government of late 1990s and 2000s who were excelling in education and smashing glass ceilings at work with an assortment of Prada and Primark handbags, but also as the 'at risk' girls in peril of binge drinking, teenage pregnancy and, post-austerity, record rates of youth unemployment. Reflecting on the articles in their special issue on youth policy in austerity Europe, Bradford and Cullen (2014:2) emphasise that 'youth itself, construed as a social category, is to large extent constructed through and by policy'. Accordingly, under New Labour, as both 'can do' and 'at risk' girls, young women were the targets of multiple government initiatives regarding family planning, employment and education, while under the austerity regime of the Coalition and Conservative governments there has been increased financial and political scrutiny of the very services responsible for facilitating their transition of adult citizens (Bradford and Cullen 2014). The scrapping of the Future Jobs Fund, and the withdrawal of housing benefit from under 22-year olds, amongst other measures, have required young women to navigate the new imperatives offered them as risk-taking, individualized consumers (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2004, 2009), whilst also engaging with post-feminist discourses of sexual empowerment and hyperfemininity. In the second decade of the 21st century, feminism is seen as having achieved its goals of gender equality and as something that can now be repudiated.

Yet the rise of neoliberalism and post-feminism has not occurred without resistance from some of the very young women who are considered to be its 'ideal subjects' (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 52). Since 2000, the UK has seen a growing movement of primarily young feminist women who have begun to organise to address long-standing issues of gender inequality, a movement that we term 'third-wave feminism'. We define third-wave feminism as the surge of feminist activism that emerged, several decades after the 1960s and 70s second-wave feminist movement, from the 1990s in the USA and in the UK from the 2000s, led by a new group of activists, most of them younger

women. There remains to date relatively little research that speaks directly to these activists or accounts for their experiences. Critically, third-wave feminism has been under-theorised, particularly in the UK, leading to conflict and confusion around competing definitions. As Snyder (2008: 175) describes, the third wave can appear at first glance to be 'a confusing hodgepodge of personal anecdotes and individualistic claims, in which the whole is less than the sum of its parts'. For some the third-wave represents a rejection of grand narratives and an embrace of the uncertainties and multiplicities of late modernity, inspired by post-colonialist, post-structuralist and intersectional theories (Mack-Canty, 2004; Mann and Huffman, 2005; Snyder, 2008). For others, the third wave represents a problematic depoliticisation and individualisation of feminism wherein attempts to embrace difference and reclaim femininity and sexuality have resulted in the loss of any serious political critique. As such, third-wave feminism has become analogous with post-feminism (Budgeon, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). In this article we argue that there is a need to rehabilitate and reframe 'third-wave feminism' in such a way that it is uncoupled from post-feminism and is instead understood in its specific national context on the basis of empirical studies of contemporary feminist activism. We argue that failure to do this work of rehabilitation results in three specific problems. Firstly, it obscures the significant influence of national political histories on the development and manifestation of feminist mobilisations. This has resulted in problematic attempts to apply critiques of American third-wave feminism to contemporary feminist activism in the UK in a way that does not do justice to its diversity and does not accurately document its activities. If our histories of feminism are to be valuable, its recording must be faithful to the events that occurred. Secondly, as UK third-wave feminism is a site of intense youth activity, the elision of third-wave feminism and post-feminism risks rendering these young women's feminist activism invisible at a time when the portrayal of young women as apolitical and apathetic benefits neoliberal discourses of individualism. This risks producing a sense of isolation and exceptionalism amongst those who are politically active. Finally, the rehabilitation of the term 'third wave' opens up new possibilities for utilising the wave metaphor transnationally. To understand feminist activism in non-Western nations in relation to

previous feminist mobilisations in those countries, rather than always in relation to waves of an abstract and universal Western feminism, is an important political as well as theoretical intervention.

As such, rather than reducing the diversity of feminist activists mobilising during any one historical moment to a question of generation, we prefer to utilise a wave metaphor that implies continuity and resurgence rather than a clean break between two generations (Aikau, 2007). There are undoubtedly problems with wave or generational metaphors, as many writers have discussed (see, for example, Aikau et al., 2007; Gillis et al., 2007; Graff, 2003; Henry, 2003; Looser and Kaplan, 1997). For instance, does 'wave' wash away the achievements of earlier generations? Does 'generation' erase feminist bodies and labour that do not fit into neat time periods? Do feminisms outside Western Europe and North America adhere to these constructions? However, as Charles and Wadia (this issue) also argue, the fluidity of waves fits better with a temporal understanding of social movement cycles of contention and abeyance that emphasise the historical and spatial contexts of mobilisation. As Kinser (2004: 131) contends, 'social change has always been an ongoing process, ebbing and flowing, slowing and quickening its pace in succession'. Waves serve as an effective metaphor to describe a period of peak movement activity within a particular regional or national context without erasing the diversity of feminist ideologies of the period. Furthermore, the absence of these cresting waves, in the periods that Taylor (1989) has conceptualised as abeyance, does not deny the continued presence of strong currents and pulls beneath the surface, as feminist activism moves into institutional spaces and the realms of other social movements. Thus, just as the second wave of feminism acts as academic shorthand for a diverse and often contradictory set of feminist perspectives and campaigns spanning the 1960s and 1970s, so too should it be possible to include a multiplicity of feminist identifications and engagements under the heading of third wave.

This temporal framing enables a recognition of third-wave feminism as a diverse cohort that includes: women who were active in the second wave and have continued to participate in feminist activism; older women and men who were not previously active but who have mobilised as feminists in the current period of activity; and most significantly in proportional terms, a younger cohort of feminists who were not old enough to be involved in women's liberation in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, but who have participated in a new wave of feminist activism since the 1990s in the US and the beginning of the new millennium in the UK. This predominance of younger activists within third wave feminism can be understood in relation to the youthful composition of newer social movements more generally (Feixa et al., 2009), and is not intended to present the third wave as a specific feminist paradigm, as dominant academic narratives have done. As such we use 'third-wave' here to describe a feminist movement or moment – a flurry of activity and a rising tide of contention – driven forward by a cohort of mostly younger feminists for whom women's liberation is an unfinished project. While a debate is emerging about whether a new 'fourth wave' of feminism, driven by and existing through social media, has begun (Evans and Chamberlain, 2015), we do not believe the concept should be applied to contemporary UK feminism – at least, not yet. 'Fourth-wave feminism' may have purchase in the USA, where the American third wave occurred before web 2.0 (social media), but in the UK social media has been integral to what we see as third-wave feminism, as developments in new technologies in the 2000s made the internet gradually more interactive, paving the way for social media. Before we present the findings of our research on third-wave feminism in the UK, we feel it is important to sketch the contours of the beginnings of third-wave feminism in its distinctive US and UK contexts. Doing so is a critical step in illuminating the value of a temporal wave model for assessing the empirical generalisations and distinctions that can be made between feminist movements in different national contexts.

US third-wave feminism

The American third wave manifested in the early 1990s. Emerging in the context of a political backlash against feminism defined by neoconservative social policy (Faludi, 1990), young American women sought to reassert a feminist identity that rejected the cultural dominance of post-feminism. As Rebecca Walker declared in the January 1992 issue of *Ms Magazine*, 'I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third wave.' In addition to signalling a resistance to post-feminist ideology, third-wave feminists sought to distance themselves from what they perceived to be the overly prescriptive and exclusionary White middle-class feminism of a previous generation. As activists coming of age in a landscape informed by the achievements of second-wave feminism, many third wavers were uncomfortable with defining their identities or politics in terms of the traditional metanarratives that heavily influenced previous forms of feminism. There was a sense that second-wave feminism insisted they choose between 'inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad' (Walker, 1995: xxxiii). As such younger feminists sought to construct a form of feminism that acknowledged the multiple contradictions inherent in late modernity, embracing ambiguity and multiple subject positions (Walker, 1995: xxxiii). Younger American third wavers asserted their new, sometimes different, concerns, seeing themselves as globally-focused and more concerned with intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003). The American third wave aimed to be diverse, including men and transgendered people and has challenged some of the more structural approaches of second-wave feminism (notably radical feminism).

Popular culture has also been central to American third-wave feminism. Some of the third wave's modes of cultural activism, including DIY zine creation (Piepmeier, 2009) and online activism, are departures from the activities of women's movements in the 1960s and 70s. Accordingly, some onlookers read third-wave feminists' interest in popular culture as a turn away from structural issues like poverty or violence. Third-wave feminists' disidentification from second-wave feminism also received a mixed response from some older feminists. Misunderstandings between members of the

second and third waves led to conflict being viewed as characterising the relationship between feminist generations, as Henry (2003) has shown, resulting in generational paradigms and mother-daughter tropes becoming central to discussions of these new forms of American feminism.

UK third-wave feminism

Third-wave feminism in the UK emerged approximately a decade later than its American counterpart, but also did so in the wake of a period of post-feminism. In the UK post-feminism manifested less as neoconservative social policy and more as a neoliberal agenda; a depoliticised celebration of women's perceived social and economic emancipation fused with an unproblematic sexualised femininity. Exemplified by the Spice Girls, the *Girly Show* and *ladette* culture (Whelehan, 2000), post-feminism in the UK has been widely critiqued by feminist authors such as McRobbie (2004, 2009), Gill (2007) and Tasker and Negra (2007), who have identified the large contribution that popular culture has made to the 'I'm not a feminist but...' attitude of many young women. It is in this context that a renewed feminist movement mobilised at the beginning of the new millennium. It did so in opposition not, unlike in the USA, to a previous feminist generation but to a culture of post-feminism in which gendered inequalities were rendered invisible by neoliberalism's all-encompassing agenda of 'choice' (a point also made by Dean, 2010: 3-4). In addition to existing feminist campaigns that had become largely institutionalized during the 1990s, new manifestations of feminism emerged to build the third wave, including public conferences (e.g. FEM conferences, Feminist Fightback, Feminism In London, and Ladyfest festivals); national issue-based campaigns addressing topics such as street harassment, pornography, religion, sexual violence and media representation; local groups established in towns, cities, regions and universities; and internet activism that utilized blogs, webzines, Facebook groups, Twitter and YouTube.

The spatial and temporal specificities of the emergence of third-wave feminism in the UK and the US are such that it is necessary to study them as separate movements. The political landscape of the two countries is starkly different, meaning that to assume third-wave feminism in the UK maps unproblematically onto its US manifestation is to lose sight of the particularities of both, and to cast young feminists' activism into the shadow of their American counterparts. In order to illuminate the state of third-wave feminism in the UK, we now present the findings from what is the first large-scale study of contemporary British feminism in the 2000s (published in Author a).

Methods

The data we present here is taken from a three year mixed methods project that used questionnaires and interviews to explore the experiences, attitudes and activities of contemporary feminist activists in the UK. The survey was publicised to members of a little over 50 UK-based feminist organisations and groups that had formed since 2000, resulting in 1,265 complete electronic and paper questionnaires being returned. Criteria for completion of the questionnaire required participants to identify as feminist or pro-feminist, but there was no restriction on the basis of gender or age. Data was cleaned, coded, and analysed using SPSS. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with 30 survey respondents who were selected using quota sampling with a view to representing as closely as possible the demographic proportion of the survey sample, with reference specifically to gender, age group, educational level, geographic location, ethnicity and religion. Interviews were conducted by the authors and transcribed before being coded using NVivo.

Findings

Of the 1,265 contemporary feminist activists in the UK that we surveyed in 2009, 62.3% were under the age of 30, while 81.7% were under 40. 91% of respondents identified as female, 7% as male,

with the remaining 2% comprising 'other' and 'prefer not to say'. The ethnic make-up of the sample was not unrepresentative of the UK population, with 91.5% identifying as White when completing a free text field. 1.9% identified as Asian, 0.8% as Black (both proportions lower than those of the 2001 Census), and 4.3% from mixed or other ethnic groups (higher than in the 2001 census). Asked to tick 'heterosexual', 'lesbian/gay', 'bisexual', 'prefer not to say' or 'Other (please specify)' to identify their sexuality, 59.8% identified as heterosexual, 10.5% as lesbian or gay, 20.2% as bisexual, 6.4% as 'other', with the remaining 3% preferring not to say. Respondents were highly educated, with 90.2% holding, or studying for, an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification. All UK regions were represented, with the highest proportions coming from London, Scotland, the Midlands, the South East and Yorkshire and Humberside.

Beyond demographic data, the survey gathered a wide range of information, including the types of feminism respondents identified with; the issues that most concerned them; the types of feminist activity they participated in; their views on the current state of feminism in the UK; and their stories of 'coming to' feminism. Presented with 20 feminist 'labels' and free to select as many as they liked to describe themselves, the most popular amongst respondents was 'just identify with feminism generally', followed by Socialist, Academic, Liberal, and Radical, in descending order of popularity. It is notable that these identifications represent most of the main ideological perspectives within second-wave feminism, suggesting likeness in political outlook (notwithstanding the fact that some of these terms may have shifted in meaning since the feminist second wave). Similarly, the three most important feminist issues to respondents were coded as: equality in work/home/education, violence against women, and the body. Within these categories the most cited issues were equal pay, rape, and abortion and reproductive rights respectively. Asked how similar they thought the important feminist issues of today were to those of the 1970s, 85.4% responded that they were very similar or quite similar. There is also a demonstrable intergenerational transmission of feminist knowledge that occurs through formalised education (46.3% of respondents had undertaken some

form of academic study of feminism or women's studies), feminist literature (reading feminist books was the second most common 'spark' for raising feminist consciousness after positive educational experiences) and working with other feminists (48.1% of respondents answered 'a mixture of ages' when asked which age group of feminists they usually worked with, the most common response).

Contemporary feminist activism in the UK, then, demonstrates little antagonism towards previous periods of feminist activity, and is committed to a politicised, collective, and diverse approach to contesting gender inequality. But what are the views of these contemporary feminists on 'third-wave feminism'? When asked to select types of feminism they identified with, 188 out of the 1256 respondents (15%) selected 'third-wave' amongst their choices, making it the 7th most popular, ahead of options such as 'queer', 'second wave' and 'eco-feminism'. Later in the survey, in response to a question asking respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statement, 'I feel positively about the term "third-wave feminism"', 35.1% agreed, 15.2% disagreed, but the largest proportion, 49.7%, were unsure or undecided. 15% of respondents identified as third-wave feminists, and a greater number felt positive about third-wave feminism, yet half of our respondents remained unsure. These responses indicate less ambivalence towards third-wave feminism than a lack of awareness or confidence in the term, a situation that was reflected in the interviews we undertook in 2010. Interviewees expressed diverse opinions on third-wave feminism but there was an overall lack of clarity around definitions of the term. Of the 27 interviewees who were questioned about third-wave feminism 23 were familiar with the term and 5 identified as third-wave themselves (a slightly higher proportion than in the survey).

Confusions around the term 'third-wave' was not uncommon, although interviewees often used their knowledge of the first and second waves of feminism to construct an answer:

I understand that there've been lots of different waves of feminism, but I'm not sure exactly what third wave means really.

(Emily, 20)

The third wave thing, I feel like I don't know enough about the first and second waves to say whether or not I'm a third wave.

(Nerys, 30)

What's first-wave? That's the vote then, and second-wave, 70s, no, that's as far as my understanding goes.

(Frances, 45)

In light of this data, and the lack of clarity amongst participants around the term 'third-wave feminism', we now turn to a discussion of three key themes that we have identified in their interpretations and negotiations of the term, namely popular culture, post feminism, and embracing the third wave.

Third-wave feminism and popular culture

Many participants referenced popular culture and media reporting in their responses. Gabrielle was not initially familiar with third-wave feminism, but when Author 1 explained that it could be used as a term to describe a revival of feminist activity, particularly amongst younger women, Gabrielle spoke about what she termed 'the new feminism':

From what I've read about it, *The New Feminism*, the book [by Natasha Walter] as well, it seems to be a more encompassing feminism where it's not, well, femininity can be expressed in a way and it's more free if you

see what I mean, but that's about it, so I haven't really looked into it that much [...] There was an interesting part at the end of the book the *Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism* [by Ellie Levenson] which has got lots of different readings, lots of feminists didn't like it, I personally did, I didn't agree with many, with some of the issues she brought forward.

(Gabrielle, 28)

In talking about contemporary feminism Gabrielle drew on her readings of two populist feminist texts (Levenson, 2009; Walter, 1999) which provide a journalistic perspective on contemporary feminism. Both argue for a separation of the personal and the political, rejecting the notion that women's private lives may be shaped by oppressive gender relations as much as their formal political status is. The remit of both books is a feminism resolutely defined by individualism and choice, rather than a critical reflection on the social changes that have inspired a new generation of younger feminists to begin to mobilise against gender inequality. To her credit, Natasha Walter (2010: 8) has since issued a *mea culpa*: 'I believed that we only had to put in place the conditions for equality for the remnants of old-fashioned sexism in our culture to wither away. I am ready to admit that I was entirely wrong'. Journalism had also influenced Margaret and Alice's understandings of third-wave feminism and both pointed to the way that newspapers have emphasised the compatibility of feminism, fashion and femininity:

I've read, you know, the think pieces from time to time about this conflict as to whether women can wear nice clothes and be feminine in that sense, are they selling out, you know. And I think it [third-wave feminism] is something to do with that.

(Margaret, 82)

Where you get these horrendous leaders about feminism isn't dead it's just mutated and now we're all so sexually liberated and we can all wear high heels and look fantastic. And, not that I'm against wearing high heels at all in any sense, but I think that it's limiting and somewhat belittling to reduce it to a question of whether you can wear heels or not.

(Alice, 26)

American feminist writings had also influenced some of our interviewees, such as Naomi (21), who described herself as 'very much an Ariel Levy feminist,' referencing the American journalist whose 2005 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* delivered a scathing attack on 'raunch culture' and the creeping cultural influence of pornography. Polly (26), meanwhile, spoke about the American website *Jezebel* (tag line, 'Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women. Without Airbrushing'), describing it as 'pop feminism' and 'very like Feminism 101'. Polly was critical of what she perceived to be hostility towards second-wave feminists, explaining how 'when I read a lot of very young feminists' writing about second-wave feminism they seem to have quite a caricatured idea of it.' Deborah's familiarity with the term third-wave came from reading one of the most popular American texts associated with the third wave, *Manifesta* (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000):

I think the first time I came in touch with kind of that term 'third wave', I was reading *Manifesta* and yes, they used that word. I can't remember why I read that book in the first place, maybe I just came across it in the library and thought that looks interesting, so, yeah, reading that and seeing I think just the ideas in that made me think, yeah, I suppose that's what I agree with.

(Deborah, 28)

What is identifiable in a number of these accounts is the consumption of popular feminism, as books or websites, that originates from the US. The contrast here between the American use of 'third wave' and references to a 'new' feminism in the UK context suggests that 'third wave' lacks cultural resonance or uptake in the British context that stems from its problematic American associations.

Third-wave feminism as post-feminism

Some interviewees were critical of third-wave feminism, considering it to signify a depoliticized, choice-centred post-feminism (Ferguson, 2010). In this respect they shared the perspective of the British radical feminists in Mackay's (2014) study for whom third-wave feminism represents a rejection of earlier forms of feminism as 'too radical, too exclusionary, and too judgmental' (Ferguson, 2010: 247). Asked her views on third-wave feminism, Carly responded:

As I understand it it's feminism of the nineties and the last decade broadly defined. But personally I have a negative reaction to the term because it seems to be to be these women who call themselves sex-positive feminists who will go out to lap dancing clubs and that sort of thing. I don't see that as being feminist behaviour so I don't identify with those third wave behaviours.

(Carly, 24)

Alice expressed concern about the way in which third-wave feminism was associated with problematic post-feminist cultural forms: 'I'm uncomfortable with the way that third wave feminism gets banded about as like, "and now it means we can all go pole dancing and this is great".' Similarly, Sandy (36) associated third-wave feminism with post-feminism, as evidenced by her initial comment

that 'I don't believe in post-feminism.' She went on to express unease with what she saw as third-wave feminism's questionable approach to sexual empowerment:

I think with third-wave feminism I have real issues – the sexualisation of women and how that's empowering I'm not really sure. I think I read an article recently about how, you know in the late 90s it was pushed too far and women could sleep with whoever they want and it's empowering and yeah, of course it is, but you know, when you put it like that and you let culture take over, it stops being empowering. It's like lap-dancing, I don't see how that's empowering... I just see it as another extension of the sexualisation of women into being complete objects, yeah, and what we're doing is trying to take claim of that in some way, or control an element of that in some way instead of changing it and saying yes. I mean it's like women having guns, you know, yes I feel empowered because I have a gun now. Well, no [...] you're admitting that you're a victim and you're admitting that you can be manipulated [...] I guess I can't get beyond the whole you know the embracing of the sexualisation [...] I'm just sitting here thinking, you know, like, women driving pink cars with Playboy bunny mud-flaps.

The type of sexualisation to which Sandy refers was also problematised by Iona, who raised third-wave feminism's 'troubling ideas about the possibilities of exuberant, unproblematic celebratory female heterosexuality.' It is this form of young female heterosexuality that Levy (2005) and Walter (2010) have critiqued from US and UK perspectives, but importantly, it has also been a significant focus for contemporary feminist activism. Campaigns such as 'Stripping the Illusion', 'Bin the Bunny' and 'No More Page Three' have all taken as their targets the continued sexual objectification of

women and the corporate exploitation of women's bodies. As recent empirical research has demonstrated, there is a long-standing and still active tradition of radical feminism and anti-pornography campaigning in the UK (Long 2011, 2012; Mackay 2014, 2015). For Iona though, third-wave feminism represented young women's post-feminist belief that feminism had achieved its goals, leaving women free to make individual choices:

I probably stereotype third-wave feminists as young vigorous women who erm, have grown up with a sense of entitlement to equality, which perhaps the rest of us, or some of us didn't grow up with [...] I think that for me third-wave feminism is for people who are shocked that the world isn't how it is painted.

(Iona, 40)

Iona's last sentence moves from seeing third-wave as post-feminist individualism to seeing it as a necessary form of liberal feminism, about asserting women's equal rights within the public sphere.

Embracing third-wave feminism

While the quotes above demonstrate some of the main concerns and confusions that abound in relation to third-wave feminism amongst UK activists, namely its conflation with post-feminism and American feminist popular culture, some of our interviewees did speak positively about the third wave. In some cases, this was clearly influenced by academic study of feminism and an understanding of some of the theoretical interactions with third-wave feminism, as Deborah demonstrated by linking it to post-structuralism:

On an academic side, I think that sort of feminist post-structuralism has a lot in common with a general sort of feminist third wave, sorts of, yeah, critiquing everything, critiquing what it is to be woman.

(Deborah)

Anya also drew on social theory to make reference to third-wave feminism's commitment to intersectionality and global focus:

The different waves of feminism have been very formative in the movement's development; I mean it's gone from very ideological first wave, to political second wave to socio-political third-wave and where it's really become a global thing, where it's stopped being just the things that the white middle class talk about in universities. It's become a thing in the 'real' world. And while the third wave is not necessarily perfect, it is definitely helping the movement adapt to the world as it is now and by that it is helping it have an effect on the world.

(Anya, 23)

As Anya's statement suggests, some interviewees were using 'third wave' as a term to describe periods of feminist activity, rather than particular feminist approaches. Jennifer was one of the five interviewees who identified as third-wave, and when asked what she felt it meant, she explained:

I think it's a journalistic short-hand, because actually second wave wasn't that unified as a wave, and one of the things I like about feminism is that not everyone thinks the same, it's a huge debate, it's all-inclusive and you can include yourself in, or opt yourself out

whenever you want. Erm, so I use third wave in the same way, it's a journalistic short-hand [...] for the way feminism is in its resurgence.

(Jennifer, 60)

Karen also identified as a third-wave feminist on the basis of its temporal reference:

At uni we talked a lot about second wave feminism, and it seemed to end in the 70s, and so I kind of took that as anyone's a feminist from then on really, and I'm 24 now, so I'm obviously part of a younger generation of feminists, so it must be the third wave surely.

(Karen, 25)

Other interviewees did not themselves identify as third wave, but did make sense of it as a period of activity, in line with the first and second waves of feminism. Marie (24) was one such example, stating that, 'I think I'd use it more as a period, for a certain period [...] I'd probably use it to start from, not a certain year, but a certain era.' Harriet was one of the few interviewees who made specific reference to cycles of contention and the activism that young feminists are engaging in:

I suppose when people look back on the different feminisms that have occurred, first wave and second wave, I don't know if the feminists who actually went through it said 'we're the second wave feminists'. So I don't know if it's sort of, now people applying the sense of what's going on or whether it's something that should be applied in retrospect when it's happened. For me I guess it's sort of like I can feel something sort of

bubbling, like with all the stuff that I see around uni and the people that I speak to because it's something new that's happening and with the recent things about the gender gap in pay [...] I suppose I see it as current issues that are concerned by gender at the moment and what that is right now, I'm not sure, I think it's waiting to happen, it's like brewing.

(Harriet, 24)

If some contemporary feminist activists comprehend third-wave feminism as a broad term used to indicate a spatiotemporal manifestation of contention, we are led to question why other interpretations of the third wave carry such ambivalent connotations for the very feminists we would argue constitute the movement. Why is it that, as for the radical feminist activists of Mackay's study, third-wave feminism connotes 'particular political ideologies [not] a generational referent or chronological marker point in the progression of feminism as a social movement' (2014: 2)? We suspect that the answer lies in 'the porous boundaries of academic, activism and popular discourse' across which 'ideas and affective investments move unpredictably' (Dean, 2012: 318). As such, in the next section we outline the contributions that British academics have made to understandings of third-wave feminism and consider how these have contributed to a limited and largely negative view of third-wave feminism in the UK.

British academic writing on third-wave feminism

Academic inquiry into third-wave feminism by UK theorists began in the early 2000s. However, there are a number of problems with the way in which recent academic literature on contemporary feminism had engaged with the third wave. Firstly, academic writing overwhelmingly considers third-wave feminism in the American context. In doing so it conflates contemporary UK feminist

activism with American third-wave feminism, or rather with *perceptions of* American third-wave feminism. As such it fails to attend to the specific cultural and political contexts in which such political participation occurs. Secondly, while the literature provides an effective overview of a number of key American third-wave texts by authors such as Naomi Wolf and Rebecca Walker, with a few recent exceptions it has failed to examine collective activism undertaken by groups of ‘third-wave’ activists and focused solely on the writings of individual authors. Third, the literature is insufficiently sociological, in that it provides textual analysis of writing rather than empirical, social scientific studies of social action. Overall, a lack of empirical investigation into the specificities of UK third-wave activism has resulted in a problematic conflation of post-feminism and third-wave which risks rendering the critical political work undertaken by young women invisible. In this section we provide an overview of the main academic approaches to the study of third-wave feminism, beginning by examining the ways in which third-wave feminism has been represented in the academic literature. In doing so we identify key academic and cultural discourses which, as we explore using empirical data from our study of UK feminist activism, have permeated contemporary feminists’ relationships with third-wave feminism.

One of the earliest academic texts to consider third-wave feminism was Gillis, Howie and Munford’s edited collection *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, first published in 2004. Many of the authors express anxiety about feminist individualism, about what they see as the third wave’s espousal of a pro-pornography position (in conscious repudiation of radical feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon), and about a ‘girlie feminism’ of lipstick and fashion exemplifying the depoliticisation of feminism. Popular culture also figures as a ‘popular’ target, with the likes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Pender, 2004), Ally McBeal (Gorton, 2004) and Lara Croft (Stasia, 2004) deconstructed as the folk heroes of the third wave. Despite being edited by three UK-based scholars, the essays draw their examples largely from the American context and contemporary UK feminist activism is not mentioned. Recent manifestations of feminist protest in the UK are also wholly

absent from Angela McRobbie's (2009) incisive analysis of post-feminist popular culture. Passing reference is made to US third-wave feminism where she dismisses 'self-described' third-wave feminist writers as individualistic, consumerist and 'anti-feminist' (McRobbie, 2009: 156-159) but no effort is made to explore feminist activism on either side of the Atlantic.

Shelley Budgeon (2011) also offers examples only from American third-wave texts. She contends that third-wave feminism should not simply celebrate individual women's experiences and should be willing to be more prescriptive about what counts as feminism; it 'must go beyond advocating for women's right to choice and self-expression and interrogate the substance of these choices in a critical way' (2011: 88). Later, she argues that 'individual empowerment is an important element in transforming current social arrangements but while necessary it is not sufficient' (Budgeon, 2011: 289-90), a statement with which we wholeheartedly agree. Yet the passionate and diverse forms of feminist activism that we encountered during our study, and which have begun to be documented in a number of recent empirical works (e.g. Dean, 2010; Downes, 2008; Long, 2012; MacKay, 2015), do not indicate that young feminists in the UK are in danger of mistaking individual empowerment for the strength of collective resistance.

A final problematic example comes from Sylvia Walby's 2011 book *The Future of Feminism*. Like McRobbie, she mentions third-wave feminism fleetingly, as a phenomenon that overlaps with post-feminism, a version of feminism enacted by younger people that is individualistic, focused on personal sexual empowerment and popular culture, but is emptied of any structural critique. Indeed, this is reminiscent of Siegel's (2007: 151) description of early American third-wave concerns as 'sex, culture and identity'. Walby expresses concern that the focus of British feminist activism is often sexuality and popular culture; she contends that young feminists celebrate free sexual exploration and 'raunch culture'. 'The question is whether these sexual and cultural practices are an extension of forms of feminism or merely a variant of sexist culture. Is this a "third-wave" feminism or post-

feminism?’ she asks (2011: 19). As we indicated earlier, the belief that contemporary UK feminism unquestioningly embraces practices of sexual objectification and pornification is not supported by empirical study of recent feminist activism. As well as the campaigns identified earlier, the content of major feminist blogs (such as The F Word and The Vagenda), the orientation of large feminist networks like UKFeminista and Object, and the arguments made in recent popular feminist books by authors including Natasha Walter (2010), Kat Banyard (2010), Laurie Penny (2011) and Laura Bates (2014), demonstrate that young feminists are critiquing, not embracing, raunch culture.

Discussion

It is only in recent years that empirical studies of contemporary UK feminist activism have begun to appear, and although these remain limited in number, they provide an alternative perspective on the state of feminist activism in the UK. Primary research on the British context does not bear out the charges of individualism and apoliticism that pervade earlier academic critiques. Dean’s (2010) study of three UK feminist organisations, for example, finds no decline in radicalism amongst more recent feminist organisations. Long (2012) charts the history of anti-porn feminism in Britain from the second wave through to the present day, giving voice to the grassroots activists involved. Radical feminism is also celebrated by Mackay (2015) who documents the intergenerational activist networks that remain committed to an analysis of women’s oppression that is rooted in theories of patriarchy and male domination. Evans’ (2015) interview study of 31 American and 35 UK feminists’ understandings of ‘third-wave feminism’ is the most directly comparable study to ours. Evans constructs a typology of understandings of third-wave feminism in academic and non-academic literature, arguing that there are five, overlapping understandings: *chronological* (emerging from the 1990s in the USA and the 2000s in the UK), *oppositional* (resistance against the perceived restrictiveness of the second wave), *generational* (associated with a younger generation), *conceptual* (focused on internationality) and *activist* (focused on inclusion of all activists and on online activism).

Evans maps interviewees' understandings of 'third-wave feminism' onto this framework, finding that activists use chronological, conceptual and generational approaches (in that order) most frequently. A minority identified as third-wave feminists (8 UK and 13 American participants), with the majority saying that they either did not, were unsure, or qualified any 'yes' approach with 'yes but...'; overall the American interviewees were more likely than the British group to identify with the third wave. Evans attributes American activists' increased readiness to identify as third wave to the fact that 'there is a greater sense of what actually constitutes the third wave in the US than in the UK' (p.15). She concludes that 'when a "neutral" approach to defining feminism's third wave is adopted (one based on chronology) then this dampens hostility to the concept' (p.16).

The confusion, ambiguity and hostility towards third-wave feminism amongst our interviewees (and among Evans' British participants) are symptomatic of lack of clarity in the academic critiques circulating at the time of the study. In their understanding of third-wave feminism, our interviewees drew on American popular cultural sources such as books and websites, conflating US and UK experiences, as do McRobbie and Budgeon. By focusing on the celebration of female sexuality and raunch culture, interviewees used third-wave feminism interchangeably with post-feminism, as does Walby. As the boundaries between academia and activism are crossed, both by activist scholars like Mackay, and by feminists who have encountered feminist theory through their university studies, so these borders become increasingly permeable and unstable. It is our hope that the recent contributions of empirical, UK-focused studies will serve to assist both constituencies in reconceptualising their interpretations of third-wave feminism in order to rehabilitate the term.

As it stands, we find the conflation of US and UK third-wave feminist practice particularly troublesome

, as it erases the relevance of historical political traditions to the development and continuation of social movements. There is an approximately 10 year difference in the emergence of third-wave feminism in the US and the UK. While third-wave feminists began mobilising in America in the early 1990s, a revival of feminist activism did not begin in the UK until the early 2000s. However, while second-wave feminism became less visible in the US in the 1980s, entering a period of abeyance in the face of neo-conservative political regimes of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush (Taylor 1989), second-wave feminism in the UK found itself enlivened by the political turmoil that resulted from Thatcher's premiership. The Miner's Strike of 1984/85 and the formation of the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common in 1981 placed women at the heart of resistance to the State and both benefited from existing feminist networks. In the UK it was the 1990s that proved to be the decade in which post-feminism rose to ascendancy, a backlash to which a new generation of feminists began to respond in the new millennium.

As our survey data has demonstrated, there is no evidence to suggest that third-wave feminism in the UK is ideologically opposed to the second wave, and a consideration of the political differences between the US and UK can shed light on why this may be. American third-wave criticisms of their feminist foremothers related in significant part to the centralised, exclusionary model of organising that characterised liberal feminism in the US in the form of the National Organisation for Women. The existence of a centralised figurehead organisation provided a convenient target for critiques of an insufficiently diverse feminist movement that privileged the experiences of heterosexual, White, middle-class American women over others. While the diversity of second-wave feminism has been similarly critiqued in the UK, the reluctance amongst British feminists to organise in large centralised groups made it easier for small groups to work together on issues where they found common ground. Where individuals and groups were ideologically opposed, there was no risk of factions destroying a singular overarching organisational structure. Additionally, the UK has a strong and proud history of trade unionism that has underlined the place of socialism in working class

communities through the twentieth century, ensuring that a critique of capitalism has never been far from the surface of British feminist thinking.

What is notable in both the academic and grassroots discussions of third-wave feminism present here is that the political activism that goes some way to define a social movement is almost entirely absent. We are not arguing that the dominant academic interpretations of third-wave feminism are invalid, rather that they do not represent the breadth of contemporary feminist activity amongst predominantly younger women. The excessive attention that has been paid to certain individualist, cultural interpretations of third-wave feminism is akin to defining the entirety of second-wave feminism by the relatively small number of lesbian separatist feminists. While this may be how second-wave feminism has come to be understood in the popular imaginary, as academics we recognise the political and ideological purposes that crass stereotypes serve. To reduce third-wave feminism to one dimension and to obscure the influence that British political history has had on the way in which it manifests, is to deny the diversity and cultural specificity of the movement. It reduces third-wave feminism to a caricature that is easily dismissed by those who oppose the continued political and social advancement of women. Furthermore, it contributes to the development of derisory narratives about the apathy and apoliticism of young women, narratives that serve neoliberalism's ideological agenda to dangerous effect. As feminist scholars we must find ways to resist this ideological colonisation, and empirical research that testifies to the day-to-day, grassroots political work undertaken by feminists is a crucial method by which to do this.

Finally, these dominant academic interpretations restrict the potential for utilising the wave metaphor to map feminist mobilisations in non-Western countries in a way that emphasises their historical and cultural contexts while enabling comparative analyses. While our focus in this article has been differences between the US and UK, the existence of women's movements globally has the potential to enable empirical comparative work on how such movements engage with and

develop feminist concepts and tactics beyond Anglo-American contexts. However this can only be done effectively if we develop ways of recognising and integrating these movements' diversity and contextual emergences. As Lotz (2003:3) highlights in her exploration of conflicting definitions of third wave feminism in the US context, 'the wave metaphor is built on the trajectory of feminist development common to countries with similar histories of sex-based struggle, and varies significantly based on national context'. Without attention to the national context, the wave metaphor becomes conceptually static, applicable only to a single manifestation of a certain type of feminism, populated by US women (who are privileged, in a global sense) responding to a particular national context. And yet freed from its association with a particular version of feminism, the wave metaphor can be applied to mobilisations internationally. In recent decades scholars and activists have rightly critiqued the dominance of Western feminist theory in relation to feminism and women's movements in the Global South, while Herr (2014) challenges the trend for transnational feminism to dismiss the relevance of the nation state and nationalism to Third World women's activism. To pay particular attention to the national context of feminist mobilisations and movements globally is crucial for resisting the tendency to elide women's experiences. The rehabilitation of the wave metaphor through its application to specific periods of mobilisation within regional and national contexts is critical if as scholars we are to make comparisons in such a way that makes a 'noncolonizing feminist solidarity across borders' (Mohanty 2002: 503) possible.

Rehabilitating the wave metaphor is valuable not only for feminist movements of the Global South, but also for those geographically closer to home. In relation to post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the problems with the wave metaphor as commonly construed are visible in Graff's exploration of Polish feminism. She contends that contemporary Polish feminism blends features of second and third wave feminisms, using 'styles and tactics characteristic of the third wave (irony, high theory, camp, cross-dressing, etc.) to achieve typically second wave aims (reproductive rights, equal pay etc)' (2003: 100). The inadequacy of the wave metaphor that this example makes

apparent is equally visible in the UK, where the core concerns of contemporary feminists are largely the same issues that concerned feminists of our second wave but the passage of time and the development of technologies is such that new tactics of contention are integrated into the activist repertoire. A temporal model of feminist waves is thus a valuable theoretical development for future empirical work.

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¹ A point Evans (2015: 16) also makes, arguing that: 'given the different US and UK interpretations and attitudes towards the term it is important to caution against the use of the blanket term "Anglo-American feminism" to denote a specific brand of feminism'.